

“WHAT I SAID I WOULD DO: III - PRAY”

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October 26, 2008

Third sermon in the series “What I Said I Would Do”
(The vows of membership in the UMC)

Philippians 1:3-11

Matthew 6:5-15

Turn on a television these days, and flip through the channels, and I guarantee you will find an endless number of talk shows. Especially these days. If they're not talking about the presidential election, they'll be talking about the economy. And if they're not talking about the economy, they'll be talking about sports. And if they're not talking about sports, they'll be talking about dating, or marriage, or raising children. It seems that we love talk shows, or there wouldn't be such a preponderance of them on the air.

Well, in a sense that's good that we love to talk and to communicate, because friends, one of the things we said we would do when we joined the church was to communicate - that is, to pray. When we joined the church, we said we would do five things - support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. So, today, in this third sermon in the series “What I Said I Would Do” we're going to spend time together talking about prayer.

You know, a number of years ago, one pastor wanted to know what children in his church thought about prayer, so he asked them to write him notes with their questions about praying. Here is some of what he received:

“Dear Pastor (nine year old Wesley wrote): Do I have to say grace before **every** meal? Even when I am only having a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

A couple more kids seemed to be fixated on mealtime too -

One seemed eager to impress her pastor, when she (10 year old Laurie) wrote: “Dear Pastor, We say grace every night before we eat, **even** when we are having leftovers from the night before.”

And yet another seemed to want the pastor to know of her suffering. Julie, age 9, wrote: “Dear Pastor, I say my prayer before I eat my supper but my mother still makes me finish my spinach and drink my milk.”

Oh my, out of the mouths of babes.

I'm not sure those kids had figured much out about prayer yet, but this next group of kids were beginning to - these children wrote out their prayers to God and their Sunday School teacher put them together in a collection. Listen to a few of them:

“Dear God (prayed Susan), Tomorrow is my birthday. Could you please put a rainbow in the sky?”

Now while Susan clearly trusted the God of creation, little David seems to have an agenda. For this was David's prayer: “Dear God, I need a raise in my allowance. Could you have one of your angels tell my father? Thank you.”

Diane, age 8, appears to have begun to understand intercessory prayer at her young age. She prayed: “Dear God, I am saying my prayers for me and my brother Billy, because Billy is six months old and he can't do anything but sleep and wet his diapers.”

And finally, I think one little boy, hit the nail on the head with his prayer. “Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of yourself too, God. If anything happens to you, we're gonna be in a big mess.”

That little boy got it - he got the essence of prayer - prayer is communion between us and God, prayer is relationship between us and God, prayer is communication between us and God. Prayer is intentional time spent in communion with God. And it is what each of us said we would do when we joined the church.

As in all things of faith, Jesus Himself is our guide when it comes to prayer. Search the scriptures, and over and over again, Jesus goes to His Father in prayer. He is in constant communion and constant communication with God. Whether it's by Himself or with others . . . whether he goes off into the hills to pray in solitude, or calls others to go with Him and pray with Him . . . whether he's laying hands on someone with prayer, or kneeling in a garden alone . . . whether it's in times of joy or times of sorrow . . . in times of triumph or times of struggle . . . Jesus is a man of prayer.

Through prayer, Jesus draws close to His Father. Through prayer, He receives power to carry out His ministry. Through prayer, He lifts up those who are hurting, and through prayer, He gives God thanks for blessings. Through prayer, He receives strength for everything He must face, through prayer, Jesus knows

peace.

Jesus is our guide when it comes to prayer. So we, as a body together, we as the church are committed to prayer. In worship, we pray together - sometimes in unison, other times in silence. We are bound together in prayer through our prayer list and our email prayer chain, which must by now, go out to hundreds of people far and wide. We have a Wednesday prayer service where a small group of dedicated prayer warriors gathers weekly to be in prayer. We pray together in our classes, our committees, our meetings, our groups. As a people together, as the body of Christ here in Elkton United Methodist Church, we are committed to prayer. We are doing what we said we would do.

Having said that, I need to remind all of us that when we joined each of us individually pledged to be persons of prayer. So how are you doing on that front? How are you doing when it comes to prayer? Are you the person of prayer you said you would be when you joined the church?

Truth be told - some of us aren't. Oh, we say we will pray, and we have all good intentions to pray, but sometimes it falls by the wayside. We get busy, and prayer falls off of our "to do" list. Or we get distracted, even while we try to pray, our minds won't shut off, and we give up too easily.

Perhaps some of us feel like we don't really know how to pray, so we don't do it. Or maybe there's a feeling we're not praying right, so we let it go.

I had to laugh when I read about a woman who had friends over for dinner one night, and she asked her six year old daughter if she'd like to say grace. The little girl replied, "I don't know what to say." To which the mother replied, "Oh, just say what you hear Mommy say, honey." So everyone bowed their head and the little girl began, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Now, while technically, that was not exactly grace, I'll bet even God Himself chuckled over that one.

I've been known to say on more than one occasion that there is no wrong way to pray - and it's true. Don't not pray because you think you're doing it wrong - offer what is in your heart to God - that's all that God wants.

There's one more reason why some don't pray - and it's because they've given up on God. They've been disappointed. Their prayers weren't answered (at least as they wanted them to be) so they've stopped praying. They are, in a sense, mad at God.

The other night, in a class here in the church, something interesting happened. The class was, ironically, watching a video on prayer, when all of a sudden a voice rang out “Answer Me, Answer Me.” It was somebody’s cell phone, which, instead of ringing, yells out “Answer Me.” As soon as it happened, I thought, that sounds like the voice of somebody frustrated in prayer - “answer me, God, answer me!” Sometimes people give up on prayer because they are frustrated.

If you are one who is struggling with prayer - maybe you’re not praying as you said you would, or you’re really struggling with the whole thing - let me go back to the reason we pray in the first place. The reason we pray is all about relationship with God - communion with God. One writer said it so well, when he wrote:

“We may best understand prayer when we compare it to significant relationships in our lives. We do not measure the value of our relationship with a close friend or spouse by whether we always receive what we want. A good friendship or marriage is about intimacy, spending time together and sharing meaningful experiences. The same is true of prayer. Prayer is an expression of intimacy with God and other persons.”

That’s why we pray, my friends. If we truly cherish our relationship with God, and with our brothers and sisters, we will give those relationships the time they need, and that means being in prayer.

And if we do, the benefits are out of this world. Once again, we turn to Jesus to see how prayer affected Him. Every time He prayed, Jesus received strength for the road ahead. He knew the assurance of a deep bond with the Father. He was filled with peace and serenity. He was more sure of the direction in which He was to go. And He was more sure that He was never alone on that journey.

So too was the Apostle Paul aware of that. The Epistle lesson this morning was a beautiful testimony to prayer in his life. He let the Philippians know of his constant prayer for them, his thankfulness for their presence in his life, and his intentional prayers for their continuing faithfulness. You can tell by his words that prayer is strong in his life, and a source of deep joy for him.

My prayer is that prayer is a source of deep joy for you too. That you find as you pray that your relationship with God grows closer and dearer, and that your love for your brothers and sisters grows more precious too. My prayer is that your prayer life will grow richer and richer with each passing day, and that the power of prayer will grow ever greater in your life.

Never underestimate the power of prayer. Never underestimate how much it matters. Never underestimate what God can do through your prayers. There are

many here who could testify, including me, to what it means to have others pray for you, especially in times of trial. It is like having a blanket of love wrapped around your shoulders - you know you're not alone, and you know God will carry you through.

There is someone with us this morning that knows that all too well. His name has been on our prayer list for quite some time now. Many of you know him personally, I've known him for much of my life. He has quite a story to tell, and it's a story about prayer - and about us. His name is Dick Jackson, you see his name on the prayer list as Judge Richard Eli Jackson - and he's going to come and share with you now what prayer and being on our prayer list has meant to him.